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DE RUEHDBU #0887/01 1851118

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FM AMEMBASSY DUSHANBE

TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0733

INFO RUCNCLS/SOUTH AND CENTRAL ASIA COLLECTIVE
RUEHVEN/USMISSION USOSCE VIENNA AU

UNCLAS SECTION 01 OF 02 DUSHANBE 000887

SENSITIVE

SIPDIS

DEPT FOR SCA/CEN

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KIRF](#) [TI](#)

SUBJECT: DEMOLITION OF TAJIKISTAN'S SYNAGOGUE: WHAT HAPPENED? WHAT'S NEXT?

REF: (A) 2005 Dushanbe 1737
(B) 2006 Dushanbe 329
(C) 2006 Dushanbe 511
(D) 2008 Dushanbe 396
(E) 2006 Dushanbe 986

¶1. (U) Summary: In late June 2008, the Tajik authorities leveled what remained of the Dushanbe synagogue. The Jewish Community had fought plans to tear the synagogue down since 2003, sporadically garnering attention from the international media. The case demonstrates the Tajik Government's lack of respect for property rights generally, and its lack of understanding of the importance of maintaining a positive international image. End summary.

¶2. (U) Despite legal challenges, a local court upheld an April 2008 eviction order against the Jewish Community, despite irregularities in the manner in which the authorities stripped the Community of its property rights. Moreover, the court ruled that the Tajik authorities are not obliged to compensate the Community for its losses. During the life of this case, Post has reported on the attempts by the Tajik authorities to raze the synagogue, (reftels B, C).

A Government That Lacks Respect

¶3. (U) EmbOffs looked at the Jewish Community's documentation, and spoke to the Community's most recent lawyer, Yakub Marupov. In this case, the authorities have relied on a weak legal infrastructure and lack of transparency to strip the Jewish Community of rights it has held since the 1950s. Moreover, the authorities have relied on a compliant judiciary to reinforce their contention that they are not obliged to provide the Community with any compensation for its loss, despite the fact that some of the buildings destroyed were privately owned. This treatment is consistent with other property rights cases Post outlined in reftel D.

¶4. (U) Post believes that the Tajik Government has not been motivated by anti-Semitism in its treatment of the Jewish Community. The synagogue case is not unique; the authorities have stripped numerous people of their property rights in the center of the city, to make way for the grounds of President Rahmon's lavish Palace of the Nation (reftel D). However, government officials do not appear to understand that such violations, particularly those against religious communities, negatively affect Tajikistan's public image.

A Cast of Characters - But No Leadership

¶5. (SBU) While the Tajik Government has shown little regard for property rights, the Jewish Community in Tajikistan has not been blessed with pragmatic leadership. The Head of the Community, Mikhail Abdurahmonov, has been unable to maintain a coherent strategy for dealing with the Government. In speaking with Embassy officials, he has been unclear about what government officials have

said or promised. He has also been unable to retain the consistent support of potentially influential international actors, such as the Bukharan Jewish Community of the United States and Canada, the National Council for Soviet Jewry, and the Euro-Asian Jewish Congress. Representatives of each of those organizations have traveled to Dushanbe since 2004 and discussed the synagogue case with officials and Community members, but none have remained engaged in the case for a significant period of time.

¶6. (SBU) Abdurahmonov also appears to have been the victim of some bad advice. He placed a great deal of faith in the negotiations between Rabbi Gurevitch, the formerly Tashkent-based rabbi who served the Dushanbe Jewish Community, and Tajik officials in 2006 (reftel E). Abdurahmonov deferred to Gurevitch on discussions with Tajik officials, but those discussions led nowhere. The Community's first lawyer, Abduzarif Mukhturov, advised the Community in 2006 that they "did not have a case." The Community's current lawyer has a different perspective, but he took the case over at a late stage, when it was essentially too late to prevent the Government from prevailing.

¶7. (SBU) Post has followed this case from the beginning and tried to assist the Community as much as possible. Post has demarched the Tajik Government, and has helped facilitate meetings with Tajik officials and interested parties, including the Bukharan Jewish Community of the United States and Canada. The case has been the subject of extensive reporting, and has been featured in the International Religious Freedom and Human Rights reports.

The Future is Hazy

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¶8. (U) International attention has once again focused on the synagogue, but the synagogue has now been torn down, and the Jewish Community has little leverage. The media reported on June 24 that Lev Levayev, the billionaire head of the World Congress of Bukharan Jews, discussed the case with President Rahmon in Dushanbe, and that land had been offered to relocate the synagogue. Levayev reportedly said that he would have more information on the financing for construction of a new building in September 2008. In a conversation with EmbOffs on July 2, Abdurahmonov said he did not know about these plans, and that he had not spoken to Levayev.

¶8. (SBU) Comment: An agreement to relocate and rebuild the synagogue would have only addressed a short term problem; the most likely location for a new synagogue would have been practically inaccessible to Dushanbe's aging Jewish population. Such an agreement would have still left the underlying problem - the Tajik Government's lack of commitment to protecting property rights, treating its citizens fairly, and subjecting its legal and administrative processes to any degree of transparency. We do not know whether there are concrete plans to build a new synagogue, or whether the Tajik authorities have actually allocated a plot of land (particularly in light of the court finding that the authorities do not have to compensate the Community). Levayev does not live in Tajikistan, and EmbOffs have so far been unable to find out more about his meeting with President Rahmon. We suspect that the media reports contain a small amount of what was actually discussed; Levayev is an influential figure with many interests, and he has unique contacts in the region. End comment.

JACOBSON